

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

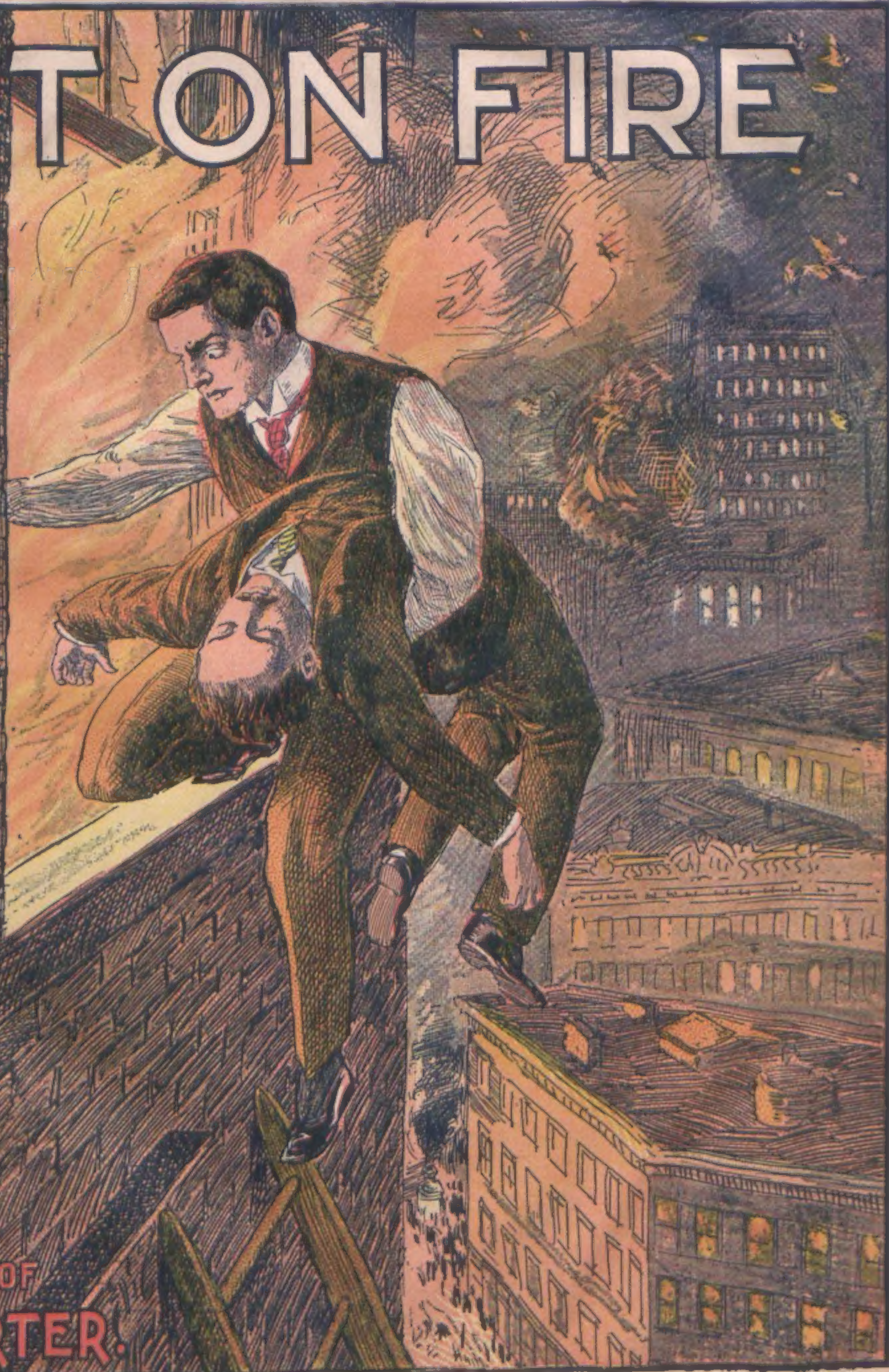
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SET ON FIRE

OR
NICK
CARTER'S
BRAVERY.



BY THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER.

NICK TOOK THE FELLOW IN HIS ARMS AND DROPPED TO THE TOP RUNG OF THE LADDER.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

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SET ON FIRE

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NICK CARTER'S BRAVERY

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE EXPEDIENT.

"And so I've got to get out. It's either Canada or Sing Sing."

"How much of the firm's money have you taken?"

"Thousands of dollars. I have lost money on everything I touched. No one ever saw such luck."

It wasn't a safe place in which to tell a secret, or to relate the details of a crime.

Harry Cole and Elmer May had both been drinking heavily in the early part of the evening, and that, in a measure, accounted for their venturing upon so dangerous a subject in so public a place.

They were sitting in the first gallery of an uptown theatre in the city of New York.

Cole was employed in a real estate and

renting office, while May was clerk in a Grand street clothing store.

"I don't see how you got hold of so much money," said May. "I can't get my hands on a cent down at my shop."

"Oh, I make nearly all the collections," was the reply. "I began holding out two or three years ago."

As the young men talked on in whispers a swarthy, black-eyed, full-bearded man, sitting in the row of seats directly behind them, leaned forward and listened.

His eyes, small, sharp, and cunning, were fixed intently on the stage, but he heard every word that was said.

There were people just as near the talkers as he was, but they seemed to be thinking only of the play.

"You'll find some way out of it," said May, in a moment. "Some of your

schemes will work, and then you can replace the money."

"I haven't any schemes at present," replied Cole, with a bitter smile. "Collections have been mighty slow lately."

"Well, I'm sorry, old man," said May, "but you have been going it a little heavy."

"Yes, and now I've got to pay for it. I believe I'd cut a man's throat, or set fire to this theatre, crowded as it is, for money enough to square myself with the firm."

The cunning eyes of the listener glittered with an inward satisfaction as Cole uttered these reckless words, and he threw himself back in his chair with a look of triumph on his swarthy face.

"You'll feel better in the morning," said May. "Hadn't we better go home now?"

"We'd better go and get a cocktail," was the reply. "This is no place to do our talking, and I'm as dry as a fish."

The two young men arose to leave the theatre.

The man who had been listening reached the exit almost as soon as they did.

"Say," said Cole, as they turned into a brilliantly-lighted barroom, "did you notice that chap who sat just behind us?"

"No."

"Well, there was an ugly-looking brute in the chair right behind me, and he got up when we did. I wonder what it means?"

"It's all right, old man," said May. "You'll be seeing a detective in every shadow until you get out of the city."

Instead of walking directly to the bar, Cole stepped behind the screen which shut out the interior of the place from those passing in the street, and waited.

In a moment the swarthy man passed him and walked along to the rear end of the saloon.

"There goes his whiskers now," said

May, as Cole stepped up to the bar and ordered a cocktail.

The young men disposed of their drinks and stood leaning against the counter, smoking and talking.

Cole glanced quickly and keenly in the direction of the man they were talking about.

Then he turned pale and caught hold of his companion's arm.

"What is it?" asked May.

Cole hesitated, with his eyes still looking toward the back end of the room.

"Nothing," he said in a moment.

"Still worrying about that chump with the whiskers?" asked May. "I think you'd better go to bed."

Cole made no reply.

He was watching the threatening eyes and motioning hand of the man who had followed him.

"Don't go away; I want to see you."

The fellow's gestures announced his will as plainly as words could have done.

May saw nothing of what was going on.

Cole was white as a sheet, and his hand trembled visibly as he pulled at his mustache.

"You'd better not wait for me," said Cole. "I couldn't sleep if I went to bed. Go on home, and I'll see you in the morning."

"You won't go away to-night?"

"No."

"I don't know whether to believe you or not," said May. "You are acting strangely. Has that fellow with the misfit whiskers got anything to do with it?"

"There's nothing wrong," said Cole, "only I'm too nervous to sleep. Go on home."

May turned toward the door.

The stranger walked forward and stood by the young defaulter.

May, turning back for the last word, saw them standing there side by side and went out without speaking.

"It's some crooked chum he doesn't want me to see," he thought. "I am sorry for the fellow."

"What do you want?" demanded Cole, in no pleasant tone, as soon as his companion had disappeared.

"We can't talk here," said the stranger.

An angry flush crept over the young man's face.

"What have you to say to me," he asked, "that may not be said here and now?"

"Don't talk so loudly," said the other. "You have done enough loud talking to-night."

The fellow spoke with a sneer.

"What do you mean?"

"I overheard every word you said in the theatre."

Cole sank back against the counter.

It seemed for a moment as if he would fall to the floor.

"Well?" he said, faintly.

"Come to my room. I think I can help you."

Cole regarded the fellow in amazement.

"Help me?" he muttered. "You?—an entire stranger!"

"Yes. Come away. You are attracting attention here."

More dead than alive, Cole took the stranger's arm and walked out of the place.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as his conductor turned north.

"To my room. It is only a few steps."

In five minutes the defaulter and his strangely found companion were seated in a cozy room in an uptown hotel.

A box of cigars and a bottle of choice wine occupied prominent positions on the table before them.

"Help yourself," said the stranger, pushing the bottle toward the young man.

"It will drive away the blue devils."

Cole poured out a full glass and drank it off greedily.

"Now what do you want?" he asked.

"As I said before," commenced the stranger, "I heard your very indiscreet conversation with that young man in the theatre."

"Well?"

"How many more friends know that you have stolen a large sum of money from your employers?"

"I have told no one else," was the reply. "I only told May because I want him to aid me in getting away."

"In what way?"

"I mean to go into the woods, or on the bay, or somewhere, and work the accident racket. Then he can return to the city and report me dead."

The stranger laughed.

"A foolish scheme," he said. "The moment your books are overhauled the truth will be known."

"But it will delay pursuit until I am out of the country."

"And also implicate your friend. It won't do."

"I don't see why you should interest yourself in my schemes," said Cole, angrily.

"Because I can help you, if you will help me."

"Help you?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"You work for Burns & Sweet?"

"How do you know that?"

"I heard you mention the firm's name up there in the theatre."

"Well?"

"I want you to destroy every record of your crime."

"But the book will be missed."

"The book? There is only one, then?"

"Only one," was the reply. "The book in which I set down my collections."

The stranger hesitated a moment, and then said, slowly, and with a threat in every word:

"There are some papers in the custody

of Burns & Sweet which I want destroyed. I followed you to the theatre to buy you up. I didn't expect to find you already a criminal."

"But how is all this to be done?" asked Cole.

The stranger bent forward and spoke rapidly for some moments in a whisper.

"Now do you understand?" he asked.

"Yes, and I refuse to have anything to do with it."

"Then you go from this place to the police station."

"In that case the proposition you have just made will be aired in court in the morning."

"Who would believe it?" demanded the other, with a laugh. "My story will be sustained by the books. We are here alone. Who will confirm your story?"

"And if I do this thing," began Cole, "what proof have I that you will not turn me over to the officers?"

"You have my word that one thousand dollars will be placed in your hands the instant that office and its contents are in ashes."

"Well, show me how to do it."

Again the stranger spoke rapidly, and in a low tone for some moments.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked in conclusion.

"Yes," said Cole, hoarsely. "The money will help me to get a new start somewhere."

"And you will return here in an hour?"

"Yes, if I am not in charge of an officer."

The young man arose and staggered toward the door.

"Here, said the stranger, "you must not go in that way. Take a drink and brace yourself up a bit."

Cole drank greedily again, and once more started for the door.

The stranger watched him pass down the elevator, and went back to his room with a diabolical smile on his wicked face.

"He will be a valuable addition to the gang," he muttered, "besides helping me out personally. I am in luck."

He dressed himself for the street, and in a short time was opposite the office where Cole was employed.

In a moment he saw a bright flame leap up on the inside of the private office.

Then Cole came to the door with a burning book in his hand and gave the alarm.

He then dashed into the street and threw the book into a sewer manhole at the corner of the street. The covers of the book were closed on a small bundle of folded papers.

"The fool! The blind fool!" muttered the waiting man. "Why didn't he let them burn?"

Then all was confusion in the street, and fire engines and policemen swarmed like flies in summer.

Then the watcher saw his accomplice seized by a policeman and taken away in the direction of the station.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

"I want to see Nick Carter."

"You may state your business to me."

"Are you Nick Carter?"

"That is immaterial. State your business, please."

The great detective and his visitor were seated in the private apartment of the former at his residence.

The visitor was evidently a Jew of the better class. He was handsomely dressed, and spoke with a musical, refined voice.

"I came here," he began, "on the recommendation of the chief of police. My name is Samuel Lamb, and I desire to consult Mr. Carter on a delicate and important matter."

As he spoke he extended a card upon which a few words had been hastily written.

"I recognize the signature of the chief of police," said the detective, "and you may proceed at once. I am Nick Carter."

Mr. Lamb regarded Nick with a look of surprise on his face.

"You are a young man to have a world-wide reputation as a clever and successful detective," he said.

The detective bowed.

"My time is limited," he said. "Please come to the point at once."

"About a month ago," began the visitor, "two young men of my race came here. When they stepped from the gang-plank of the vessel which brought them over they disappeared. I want you to aid in finding them."

"Do you know of any reason why they should remain in hiding?"

The visitor's face flushed, and he hesitated a moment before answering the question.

"There is no good reason why they should remain away from their friends," he said, "although I can readily imagine a condition of affairs which would cause them to do so."

"Were they accused of crime in the old country?"

"They were guilty of a boyish prank which could in no way affect them in this country."

"And you believe them to be in hiding for fear of the officers?"

"Yes."

"And your only motive in discovering their whereabouts is to assure them of their safety?"

"Not exactly. Since their departure from Russia, which was some months prior to their arrival in New York, they have inherited a very large fortune. I want to place them in possession of their money and their estates."

"You are certain they reached New York?"

"Yes."

"But you have no proof that they are still alive?"

"Not the slightest, and that is what troubles me. The property is claimed by a distant relative, who would inherit it in case of their death."

"What sort of man is this distant relative?"

"It is a woman."

"Ah! what sort of a woman?"

"A cunning woman, with a beautiful face, a perfect manner, and a heart fit to mate with the Evil One himself."

"This is becoming interesting. Does this woman attempt to show that her kinsmen are dead?"

"No, but in their absence, through an agent named Brown, she demands possession of the property."

"She is none too good to connive at their death?"

"She would murder them without scruple or remorse."

"What is her name?"

"Rebecca Sandler."

"And the names of the missing men?"

"Joseph and Maurice Pressburg."

"Have you the papers relating to this fortune?"

"Certainly."

"Are they in your possession now? Did you bring them with you?"

"They are at present in the office of my agents, Burns & Sweet."

The detective gave an almost imperceptible start.

"Have you been to the office of your agents this morning?" he asked.

"I have not. Why do you ask that?"

"Have you read the morning papers?"

"I have not."

Nick took a newspaper clipping from his table and passed it over to his visitor.

"Read that," he said. "The office of Burns & Sweet was set on fire last night and valuable papers are said to be missing this morning."

There was a troubled look on the face

of the visitor as he read the clipping and handed it back.

"I don't understand it," he said.

"What were the papers?" asked the detective.

"The will and a list of all the property belonging to the estate."

"The original will?"

"I am not sure of that. It seems to me that it would hardly be possible to get that out of Russia; but of one thing I am positive."

"Well?"

"And that is without those papers my clients will be put to great trouble in securing their rights if they get them at all."

"It looks to me as if your bold, bad woman was getting down to business," said the detective.

"If you will take the case we may defeat her yet."

"I may as well help you out," said Nick, "especially as the case has already excited my curiosity."

"Then we may as well proceed to the office of Burns & Sweet at once. I am anxious to know whether those papers were injured or destroyed."

Nick sat back in his chair with an amused look in his eyes.

"Go and consult with your agents at once," he said, "and remain there until I come."

"Very well."

"But you won't see me there as you see me now," said the detective, "and even if you do recognize me you must not seem to do so."

"How shall I know you?"

"You may keep looking until you hear a man talking about Erie stocks and bonds in connection with farm produce, and then you may keep your eyes on that man."

"I understand," said the visitor, with a smile. "I think you may trust to my discretion."

In a short time Mr. Lamb was seated in the private office of his agents, on Broadway.

At first he could not summon courage to ask the important question he was there to ask.

"You had an accident here last night," he finally said.

"Merely a trifle."

The expression of Mr. Burns' face gave the lie to his words.

"The papers say you lost some valuable papers," continued Mr. Lamb.

Burns tried hard to seem amused.

"The papers always get things mixed," he said.

"Then my papers are all right?"

"Certainly."

Lamb gave a sigh of relief.

"I am glad to hear it," he said, "for the case is sufficiently complicated as it is."

Burns drummed on his desk with the ends of his white fingers, and said nothing.

Just then a voice was heard at the door of the private office.

"Never mind," it said, "I'll walk right in. I want to see about buying Erie stocks or bonds. They'll go a-kiting when the farm produce begins to come in."

Lamb looked up in amazement.

A portly, red-faced man, with a loud voice and a louder suit, stood in the doorway.

"Just reading about your being burned out last night," he said, addressing himself to Burns. "It doesn't look as if you'd had much of a scorch. Papers all right?"

Burns was plainly annoyed at the interruption.

"I am busy at present," he said. "Can't you call later in the day?"

"Oh, I'll wait," said the newcomer, coolly throwing himself into a chair. "I'm John Boland, of Chicago, and I want to talk about Erie."

Burns went on with his writing.

A clerk from the outer office appeared in the doorway.

"Step this way, if you please," he said to the newcomer. "Perhaps I can wait on you. Mr. Burns is busy, as you see."

"All right," said the disguised detective. "You'll do as well as another, perhaps. Are you the clerk the police arrested last night and let go of mighty sudden?"

The clerk's eyes flashed angrily, but he smiled as he replied:

"Yes, I am the one. It was my first experience in that direction."

"First time to everything, as the man said when they took him out and hung him," said the Chicago man. "Any valuable papers lost last night?"

Nick eyed the clerk keenly as he asked the question. The clerk bent over his desk and muttered that everything was all right so far as he knew.

"Glad of it," said the detective. "I expect to do a little business with this firm, and I want to know that my papers are all right."

After some conversation with the clerk, Nick stepped to the door of the inner room again.

Burns' eyes were fixed on his desk, and so he did not see the signal which passed between Lamb and the seeming Chicago man.

"I'll call again," said Nick, "when you have more time. Good-day. Glad you got out of the fire all right."

Nick left the office, and in a moment Lamb excused himself and followed him.

Then Burns summoned Cole into the private office.

"Have you discovered that book or those papers yet?" he asked.

"I am sorry to say that I have not."

"Keep on looking. They must be found. I had to lie to Lamb not a moment ago."

The clerk bowed and went back to his desk.

There was a peculiar smile on his face.

They must be in the ocean by this time," he muttered.

A short distance from the office Nick walked up to Lamb and touched him on the shoulder.

"It is a good thing you gave me a word to recognize you by," said the latter. "I never should have known you."

"What did he tell you about the papers?" asked Nick.

"He said they were all right."

"Did you ask to see them?"

"No, I never thought of that."

"Well, the papers are not there, and that clerk knows more about last night's affair than he is willing to tell."

"What makes you think that?"

"His actions principally," was the reply. "What were the associations of the Pressburgs in Russia?"

"They were tailors, and associated with people of their own walk in life. This fortune comes from an uncle who never recognized them in life."

"Then I know just where to look for them."

The detective ordered a cab, and the two men were driven to Suffolk street.

"This is the sweater district," said Nick as they left the cab, "and we may hear of them here."

Closely followed by his companion, Nick entered a narrow alley and soon came to a wretched, rubbish-lined court, hedged in by towering masses of brick.

The low but distinct whizzing sound of many sewing machines was heard.

Nick ascended one flight of stairs after another until he came to the fifth landing, passing through many dark and musty halls on the way.

At the fifth landing he knocked at a closed door and pushed it open without waiting for it to be opened.

The room contained at least a dozen

workmen of the black, scraggly-bearded Russian type.

After one look at the visitors, they worked on stolidly.

Nick talked in French to one of the men who seemed to act as foreman, but got little information.

In a moment he left the shop and went to another on the same floor.

As they stepped into the dark hall, one of the men who had been at work in the room they had just left went to the door and opened it.

Then he turned back, said a few words in Russian to the man in charge, and entered the hall.

When Nick got to the door of the second room Lamb was not by his side.

He called out to him, but received no answer.

The detective stepped a few feet beyond the door, crouched down and lit his dark lantern.

In a moment its rays shot down the length of the hall.

Lamb was nowhere in sight.

"There is something wrong here," thought the detective. "Can it be possible that the rascals have recognized Lamb as interested in this search and taken him away from my very side?"

The detective advanced toward the landing again.

As he did so, he heard the banging of a heavy door in the distance, a blow and a cry for help.

CHAPTER III.

FIGHTING THEIR FRIENDS.

"But the papers were not destroyed."

"You saw the fire, and you saw the heap of cinders on the office floor. What makes you say the papers were not burned?"

The stranger, who had instructed Cole to call him Thomas Brown, walked up

and down the floor of his room with an evil smile on his face.

"You know the papers were not burned," he said. "You threw them into the manhole of the sewer."

"How do you know that?"

Cole had been angry before. Now there was a touch of fear in his voice.

"Bah! I stood there across the street and watched you."

"Then you were there before the officer arrested me?"

"Yes, and I was there all the time you were at the station."

"I thought you had more confidence in me than that," said Cole.

"I have confidence in no one who first robs his employers and then sets fire to their premises," was the reply.

"Well, the papers are out of the way, at all events. They are in the sea by this time."

"How do you know that? Who knows what fortunate devil may find them floating on the water?"

"I want my thousand dollars just the same. This mystery can't last forever, and I must leave the city."

The time was noon, and Cole was supposed to be out for lunch.

"You have a few more fires to set before you leave the city," said Brown, coolly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there are people we want to get rid of."

"Then you'd better hire some one to do your dirty work. I have had enough of you," replied Cole, angrily.

"In for a penny, in for a pound, my friend," said Brown, coolly. "You may as well stay with us now."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then the doors of the State prison open for you."

"Why do you insist upon dragging me into your schemes, when there are hundreds who would be glad to assist you?"

"Because it is not safe to take too many into one's schemes. Besides, you are well dressed and seemingly respectable. You may wander into any building you choose without exciting suspicion. That is why we want you."

"You are a devil."

"No, I am only a prudent man. I demonstrated that when I made your acquaintance on the basis upon which we are now working."

"And you intended all the time to make me your tool in this dangerous work?"

"Most assuredly."

With an oath, Cole sprang at the throat of his tormentor.

Brown seized him around the waist and hurled him fiercely to the floor, where he lay panting with rage.

"Don't try that again," said Brown, bending over the prostrate man, with the look of a fiend in his eyes, "for you will not escape so easily the next time."

Cole arose to his feet with a scowl on his face.

"When you are ready to listen to reason," said Brown, "I have something to say to you."

"Then say it now, for I must hasten back to the office."

"There are two men in the city who must be put out of the way."

"Go on."

"They are friendless and without means, so the job is by no means a risky one. Besides, I have a plan which will make their death appear to be accidental."

"Come to the point. Why do you wish these men murdered?"

"A friend of mine will inherit a vast estate upon their death."

Cole walked up and down the room for some moments without speaking. Brown eyed him suspiciously.

"What do you say?" the latter asked, finally.

"I will think about it."

"It is but a trifle. They sleep in a loft on Suffolk street. Drop a bit of a liquid I will give you into their beer and they will sleep soundly."

"And then?"

"If the building should happen to burn down in the night they will perish, like the rest of the vermin, in the flames."

"But the Suffolk street tenements are crowded with women and children, and hundreds might be burned to death."

Brown shrugged his shoulders.

"They will be warned," he said.

"It can't be done. What you propose is wholesale murder."

"It must be done. I would trample out a thousand lives in order to aid in securing this fortune."

"Give me until night to think it over."

"Very well, come here at five."

Cole paused on his way to the door.

"I don't see," he said, "how it is that these men you speak of can leave a fortune to anyone, if they are without means themselves, as you just stated."

"They are ignorant of the death of a wealthy uncle, and they are in no condition to find out about it. They came here from Russia fugitives from justice."

"I'll see you to-night," said Cole, shortly, as he turned away.

Brown waited a few moments and then left the room.

"I shall have to watch that fellow," he muttered. "He has the very devil in him. How his eyes glared when he sprang at me in there."

Half a dozen blocks away from the hotel Brown paused on a street corner and glanced anxiously over the course he had pursued.

"There's that fellow I saw when I went into the hotel," he thought. "I wonder if he's following me?"

The man in question looked like a me-

chanic in hard luck. His face was half covered by a short beard, and his clothes, which were of the cheapest material, were faded and worn.

He walked with a slouching air, as if apologizing for his existence.

He walked straight past Brown as the latter stood on the corner and soon disappeared in the crowd.

"I believe he is watching me," thought the plotter. "I'll make sure before I go to Suffolk street."

He turned down a side street and entered a small cigar store.

In a moment the seeming mechanic passed the place.

Brown hastened out, fully resolved to face the fellow and demand an explanation, but his shadow was nowhere in sight.

He called a carriage and was driven rapidly to Suffolk street.

"The pauper will be in good luck if he keeps up with this pace," he thought, as the vehicle dashed down the street.

But a block away another carriage was driving along in the same direction at equal speed.

A bundle of clothes lay in the bottom of this vehicle, and the occupant was a seedy mechanic no longer.

He looked more like a gay young clerk out for a holiday.

Brown left his carriage at the entrance to the alley which Nick Carter and Samuel Lamb had entered but a short time before, and began to climb the steep stairs.

In one of the dark halls he came in contact with a moving human figure, and sprang back with a growl like that of an angered animal.

"Keep out of my way," he said. "Why don't you have some light in these cursed halls? A man might break his neck here, or get lost and never see the light again."

A low laugh was his only reply.

He took a match from his pocket and struck it on the wall.

The wall was damp and it refused to ignite.

Then he struck it on his clothing, holding it aloft, after the manner of a torch, as it flared up.

Two young men of two or three and twenty stood before him, both grinning to the fullest extent of their coarse mouths.

They were rough-looking fellows, but there seemed to be nothing vicious about them.

"You here?" said Brown, with another oath. "I was just going up to see you."

"And we were going to see you."

The talk was all in Russian.

"Then you had something to tell me," said Brown, hastily. "What is it?"

Without speaking a word the men turned about in the hall and led the way up a flight of dark stairs to a miserable loft.

"You are mighty cautious about whatever you've got to say or do, to say the least," muttered Brown, as one of the men locked and bolted the heavy oaken door.

This task completed, the fellow stepped up to Brown, by this time doubly mystified, and raised his hand as if invoking silence.

"What do you mean by such actions?"

"Listen."

Through the loose boards of a light partition at the rear end of the loft came the sound of heavy breathing and now and then the restless movements of a human body in uneasy sleep.

The young Russians grinned as the sounds came to their ears.

"What is it?" demanded Brown.

"You remember the man you showed us and warned us against—the man of the law who wants to send us back to Russia for trial and execution?"

"Yes."

The Russian pointed significantly, over his shoulder with his heavy hand.

"He is there," he said.

Brown gave a start of pleasure and surprise.

"Do you mean to say that you have Samuel Lamb in there?" he asked, in a moment. "How did it happen? Tell me at once, Joseph Pressburg."

"Hush; don't speak that name here," said the young man, in terror-stricken tones. "He came here with another man and we called him away. In one minute he was sound asleep," added the fellow, with another grin.

"You did well," said Brown, "for the man would drag you back to Russia or execution. But what became of the man who came here with them?"

"He disappeared. We hunted over the building for him, but he must have made his escape."

"This man, Lamb, must not be allowed to escape. You must kill him."

Joseph and Maurice Pressburg nodded sullenly, and sat down to plan the murder of the only man in the world who had it in his power to place them in the possession of a mighty fortune.

In the meantime the second hack had stopped in Suffolk street, and the gay young clerk had entered the dark halls of the huge building.

In the midst of their plotting the three men in the loft heard a faint noise at the door, and sprang to their feet.

The noise, which was like the moving of hands over the panels, stopped, and all three men moved toward the room at the rear of the dismal loft.

Joseph Pressburg unlocked the door, and all stepped inside.

The sound of heavy breathing was no longer heard.

The Russians pointed to a dark object lying in one corner and made motions of congratulations.

Brown stepped forward and raised a heavy cloth which covered the object.

Then he sprang back with a curse upon his lips.

"There is no one there, he almost shouted. "While we have been idling there he has escaped."

The Russians, not knowing what else to do, tore frantically about the room, looking in all possible and impossible places for the escaped prisoner.

Brown opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

Then the young men waiting on the inside heard his slow steps turn into a run, and heard a shrill call.

They dashed out to find Brown standing by the landing with blood dripping from a huge knife in his hand.

"I met him here," he said, excitedly, "and we had a struggle. Someone came to his assistance, and I struck out with my knife."

Joseph Pressburg pointed toward the bottom of the staircase.

"There is someone down there," he said, "and there is blood on the stairs."

"Go down and see who it is," said Brown, faintly.

The Russians both stepped toward the bottom of the stairs.

Then Brown heard soft footsteps behind him and turned hastily around.

As he did so he received a blow on the head which felled him to the floor.

Then he saw a strange face bending over him, heard a cry of alarm from the foot of the stairs, saw a score or more of bearded Russians spring into the hall below, and heard the sound of blows.

Then he fell back on the floor like a dead man.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIREBUGS.

A slouching figure, dressed like a dealer in rags and iron, crept into a basement on Twelfth street, not far from the East River, and crouched down in a corner.

In five minutes, seeing that his entrance had not been observed, he took a can of kerosene oil and a package of matches from a bundle which he had carried under his arm.

He poured the oil over a dry partition and left a little pool of the inflammable stuff on the basement floor.

Then he laid a small fuse and lighted it.

This done, he sneaked out of the basement and joined a man who appeared to be waiting for him on the opposite side of the street.

"Is it all right?" asked the waiting man.

"Yes."

"How long will it take?"

"Five minutes."

"Then we must hurry."

The two men walked west a short distance and entered a "furnished room" building.

Ascending to the top floor they unlocked a door and entered a small, plainly furnished room.

One of them stepped to the window and raised it, and then both proceeded to change their clothes.

The suits they put on in place of the foul ones they had previously worn were of costly material and were well made.

In a short time the two rag and iron men became fashionably dressed gentlemen, so far as appearances were concerned.

"Say, Dick," said one of them, after the change had been made, "I don't see any commotion in the street. Your fire must have been discovered and put out."

"It is hardly time yet," replied the other.

The time was five o'clock in the afternoon of the incidents at the Suffolk street tenement.

"I don't like the job we have on hand," said one of the men, in a moment.

"No more do I."

"I can burn houses in the daytime," continued the other, "and make myself merry robbing flats, but this cold-blooded murder goes against me."

"Still we must do it or break with Tom."

"Curse Tom," said the other, "I wish the people down on Suffolk street had finished him to-day, instead of giving him a good pounding."

"How did it happen?" asked Dick. "I know that he came home with a bad cut in his head, and that's all I know about it."

"He went down there on some business and was knocked down. He would have been killed, I guess, only the Russians rushed out of a sweatshop down stairs and chased his assailant away."

"Didn't they catch him?"

"The assailant? Yes, and no. They cornered him."

"Who was it?"

"Brown swears it was a detective."

"It seems as if all those men ought to have captured him."

"Well, they didn't, but they've got him where he can't get away."

The men paused in their talk and listened for some indication of alarm in the street below.

"I guess your fire went out," said one of them, whom Dick called Bob.

"I don't think so. Wait a little while. Where is Brown now?"

"He went back to his hotel. He says he must return to the tenement to-night," replied Bob.

"I hope he'll get killed there," said Dick. "He leaves all the dirty work for

us to do. Here we've burned a dozen buildings for the purpose of robbery, and have stolen thousands of dollars worth of stuff, and what have we made by it?"

"Nothing, and now he wants us to murder this woman."

"Do you know who this woman is?" asked Dick.

"No."

"It is his wife."

"Impossible."

"Nothing is impossible with that man."

"But why should he want his wife murdered?"

"He married her this morning to——"

Bob stopped him with a gesture of surprise.

"This morning?" he gasped.

"Yes, this morning."

"And wants her murdered in the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"It seems incredible."

"Tom Brown, as he calls himself," replied Dick, "is not a man, but a devil."

"But this murder?"

"Pshaw! He married the woman in order to get his fingers on a fortune which she will inherit."

"But she may not leave it to him."

"She made a will in his favor this morning, just after the marriage ceremony was performed."

"Well," said Bob, "of all cool-headed deviltry I ever struck, this is the worst."

"You may well say that."

"I propose that we fool him and let the woman live," said Bob.

"It won't do. The woman is as bad as he is. She is trying to murder two men in order to get the fortune, so he says."

Bob walked to the open window and listened again.

"There is a cry of fire down there," he said, after listening a moment.

"Now understand," said Dick, "we

rob the flats in the building where the woman is before we go to her room."

"Of course."

"Then we do our work in her room."

"I understand."

"And the newspapers will say in the morning that she resisted the robbers and was murdered."

"The scheme is all right," said Bob.

"Brown always was a devil at scheming."

The two ruffians locked their door and hastened to the street.

The building Dick had fired was enveloped in flames from basement to attic.

The inflammable oil had done its deadly work well.

The street was crowded with people, and the police were forming a fire line.

Fire engines were rattling up, and all was excitement.

The men explained that they lived within the fire lines which had been stretched across the street, and darted away toward the building where their ghastly work was to be done.

"The people are either on the street or looking out of the front windows," said Dick, "and we shall have a clear field. Remember, now," he added, "if we are caught, we are simply looking for furnished rooms. It's an old gag, but it will work."

The men were soon in the building, on the second floor of which two young women were watching the fire from a small balcony.

"It is a dangerous fire," one of the women was saying.

"Yes," replied the other, a tall, slender-looking American girl, with pretty brown hair and eyes, "and they are saying downstairs that it is the work of an incendiary."

The girl's companion was a handsome young woman with black hair and velvet black eyes. Her figure was slender and

graceful, and she would have attracted attention anywhere for her beauty.

"You are kind to allow me to visit you so soon after my arrival in the building," said the girl. "I have been here only a few hours, and yet you treat me like an old friend."

"You have always lived in New York?"

"Always."

"And always shall?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Oh, I shall go back to Russia, where I have inherited estates. Did you know that I was married this morning?"

"Married this morning?" exclaimed the other. "Where is your husband?"

"Away on business. He may not return for several days."

"And your name is?"

"Mrs. Thomas Brown. A plain name, surely."

The girl went to the door and looked down the long hall.

"There is always stealing going on," she said, "whenever there is a fire. I mean to watch my room."

The door of the girl's room was in full view from the door of the front room.

As she looked she saw it move a trifle.

"I am certain I left it locked," she thought, starting down the hall. "Someone must have broken in."

Her step was remarkably light as she moved down the carpeted hall.

She did not go directly to the door, but turned to the right and passed down a little hall leading to some rooms on the east side of the building, from one of which a door opened into her room.

There was no one in the rooms when she entered, and in a moment she was on a chair looking through the transom.

The two men were searching her room for valuables.

Instead of crying out, the girl laughed quietly to herself.

"I shall have a great story to tell Nick Carter," she thought. "The idea of his

lady assistant having her room searched by thieves while she is trying to entrap a would-be murderess."

Finally the men gave up the search, but before they left the room they fastened black masks over their faces.

"There is something more than robbery going on here," thought Nellie, climbing down from her perch and hastening through the little hall.

Just as she reached the main corridor she heard a scream from the room where she had left Mrs. Brown.

She drew a revolver and opened the door.

The woman she had just left was struggling with the two masked men.

As Nellie entered, revolver in hand one of the men sprang at her.

The other drew a knife and struck at the woman on the floor.

The girl fired, and the fellow with the knife fell with a stream of blood pouring from his side.

Then the fellow facing the nervy girl struck fiercely at her with a billy and darted toward the door.

With the light of a wounded tigress shining in her eyes, the woman staggered up from the floor and seized him by the ankles.

"I know you," she screamed. "Tell me who sent you to do this thing and then finish your work."

Nellie leveled her weapon and called to the fellow to surrender, but he bent over the woman with a brutal laugh, whispered a few words in her ear and then struck her down with one savage blow.

Nellie sprang forward, but was too late.

The fellow darted through the doorway and bounded down the stairs.

Then the girl bent over the wounded woman.

"He did it," cried the latter. "He did it. Help me to live that I may be a curse to him."

Then a succession of heavy knocks

sounded on the door and Nellie called out that the door was not locked, and that the person might enter.

The door opened and Mr. Thomas Brown stepped inside.

CHAPTER V.

HIDE-AND-SEEK.

When Nick Carter found himself in the dark hallway with the cry for help ringing in his ears, he ascended to the attic floor and glided into a little passage from which the sound seemed to proceed.

He heard doors opening and closing on the floor below, and voices speaking in Russian.

Then he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and presently a voice asked in French:

"Who's there?"

There was no answer, and the questioner advanced up the hall to the little passage where the detective was concealed.

"Joseph!"

Still no answer.

"Maurice!"

Receiving no reply, the fellow struck a match and stepped into the narrow passage.

The match flared for an instant and went out.

Nick heard him feeling for another and glided past him and crouched down in the main hall, close by the passage.

The fellow found a match and lit it and went on down the passage.

"Pressburg!"

As the fellow called out he knocked heavily on a door at the end of the little hall.

"I hope he'll find them," thought Nick, with a smile. "I want to see Joseph and Maurice Pressburg myself."

The fellow waited a moment and knocked again, calling out in the French

language as he did so, that the man who stood at their door was a friend.

"What do you want?" asked a voice, speaking in the same language.

"I heard a strange cry up here," was the reply, "and I thought you might be in trouble."

"It is nothing," said the voice on the other side of the door. "My brother fell and hurt himself."

The fellow blundered back down the passage, muttering to himself as he went.

Nick heard him pass down the stairs and enter the sweaters' shop below.

Then he crept up to the door and listened.

"Joseph and Maurice Pressburg are in that room," he thought, "and they have captured Lamb in some mysterious way, believing that he came here to help drag them back to Russia. I wonder if I can make them understand just how the case stands."

After a moment's reflection, however, he abandoned the idea.

"I should only get myself into trouble," he thought. "The men are prejudiced and ignorant, and I could not make them understand."

In a moment he heard the two brothers talking, still in French, on the other side of the door.

"This is the man Brown warned us against," one of them said.

"Doubtless."

Then he heard Lamb's voice.

"You are Joseph and Maurice Pressburg?" he asked.

The brothers maintained a sullen silence.

"If you are," continued Lamb, "I have good news for you."

"Well?"

The fellow spoke in a sneering tone.

"Your uncle in Russia is dead and you inherit all his property."

The brothers broke into a coarse laugh.

"But we must go back to Russia to get it?" one of them said.

"To take possession of the estates, yes, but to become possessed of the money, no."

"Give us the money, and you may have the estates."

The fellows laughed again at what they considered an excellent joke.

"Why do you act so strangely?" demanded Lamb, "and why do you look at me in that way? I shall not attempt to leave the place unless I go in your company. I have searched for you a long time."

"You want us to go back to Russia?"

"Yes."

"To become meat for the headsman. A nice fortune that is to come into, eh, Joseph?"

"Decidedly."

"But that boyish prank amounts to nothing. It has already been forgotten."

"You are cunning," said one of the brothers, "but we are more cunning still. Instead of going back to the headsman with you, we propose that you shall remain here with us, in this loft, until we have made up our minds what to do with you."

"What to do with me?" asked Lamb. "Do you mean that I am a prisoner here?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And I came here to restore you to your friends."

"You are mistaken. We claim no friendship with the headsman."

"You won't believe me?"

"No."

The detective heard a short struggle, and then a heavy fall.

"Bind him," panted one of the brothers. "He fights like the devil that he is."

Nick was about to force the door and take a hand in the conflict when he heard footsteps on the stairs again.

"I can't fight a mob of Russians," he thought, "so I'll see what I can find in the way of a hiding-place."

The detective cast the concentrated rays of his dark lantern hastily around, and saw that a small door opened from the passage to the right.

It was locked, but his pick-lock soon shot the bolt back, and he entered.

The room was dark, dusty, and, what was more to the purpose, empty.

It had a door connecting with the room in which the brothers had taken refuge with their prisoner, and a window looking out into a dark court, but the latter was so covered with cobwebs and dust that very little light crept through the broken panes.

The roof of the great building sloped almost down to the rough floor on two sides, and old trunks and boxes were tucked away under the slanting roof-boards.

Nick located a hiding-place behind one of the boxes, and then went to the door and listened.

Two men, evidently from the sweaters' shop below were in the room, talking in Russian with the brothers.

The detective could understand very little what was being said, but he knew that they were discussing the whereabouts of the man who had entered the building with Lamb.

Finally the two brothers went away and then the others talked in French.

"He is an officer," one of them said.

"He came here to pry into our business, as well as to take the Pressburgs away to execution."

"That is so."

"The building must be searched. He is secreted in it."

"Undoubtedly."

In a short time the brothers returned, held a short conversation with their friends, and went away again.

"They have gone to get some of what

the Americans call knock-out," said one of the men, as soon as the door closed, "and then we will give it to our friend here and search the place."

Nick felt nervously in his pockets and found that he had his antidote for "knock-out" with him.

Before long the brothers were in the room again, and Nick heard them struggling with Lamb in their endeavor to get some of the drug down his throat.

The struggle was a short one, and Nick knew that for the time being he could expect no help from Lamb.

He knew, too, that he must get to his friend as soon as possible and administer the antidote, for the stuff frequently proved fatal in its effects.

Presently he heard a key inserted in the lock of the door connecting with the room in which he was concealed, and hastened into his hiding-place.

He had scarcely concealed himself when the door opened and the four men entered, bearing the unconscious man between them.

Then the two brothers hastened away, but the Russians waited a moment to inspect the room.

"There is no one here," said one of them.

The other gave an exclamation of alarm and pointed toward the floor.

"There are tracks in the dust," he said. "Some one has been here within an hour."

One of them came directly toward the spot where the detective was concealed.

Nick knew that the sharp eyes, which, familiar with the dim light of the sweaters' shop, had discovered the tracks on the dusty floor in the twilight of the room, would eventually seek him out, and so he prepared for action.

At last the fellow bent over the box and reached out his hand.

"Here he is," he said.

The detective sprang to his feet and struck out with his right.

The Russian fell with a thud which seemed to jar the floor, and his companion sprang forward to his assistance.

Directly he was in the same fix as his companion, and then Nick turned to assist Lamb.

He poured the antidote down his throat and got him into fair shape in a very short time.

The two Russians still lay on the floor, where they had fallen.

Nick was about to bind them when he heard the two brothers returning to the room.

He locked the connecting door with his pick-lock, and stood waiting.

"I wish Chick was here," he thought. "I wonder what he found at that real estate office to trail away. And Nellie? She must be having a gay time getting rooms in the same building with Miss Rebecca Sandler. I think the ropes are laid all right, if I can get out of here with a whole hide and take Lamb with me."

Lamb sat on one of the boxes with his head on his hands. His head still ached from the effects of the "knock-out," and he was in terror of his life. Nick got him into a hiding-place and again concealed himself.

Presently they heard Brown's voice in the front room, and then the connecting door was unlocked.

The Russians staggered to their feet and, without knowing what they were doing, blundered through the door opening into the passage.

Then the three men entered the room and Brown stepped forward and raised a heavy cloth which covered a trunk.

With a cry of rage, he darted out into the hall, and in a moment Nick heard a shrill call.

"He has mistaken the Russians for us," whispered Nick to his companion.

"I'd like to be there and see the fun."

The brothers hastened out, and Nick crept on behind.

He saw the two brothers pass down the stairs to look at a body lying there, and saw the remaining Russian sink down in a corner in a swoon. He had not yet recovered from the effects of Nick's blow.

"They won't find him there right away," thought the detective.

Brown stood at the head of the stairs.

Beckoning to Lamb to follow him, the detective darted forward and dealt the plotter a blow which had about the same effect that the drug had had on Lamb a short time before.

The Russian staggered to his feet again and bent over the prostrate man.

Nick was about to spring downstairs when a swarm of sweaters rushed out of the doorway below and started upstairs on a run, jabbering all the time in their native tongue. Lamb, frenzied with fright, sprang forward as if to do battle with the crowd, but Nick pulled him back.

Before the detective could get away the mob was upon him.

He struck out hard and quick, but there were a dozen strong men to one—for Lamb was of little use in that shouting, surging mob—and the detective was borne to the floor.

Then the men before him seemed to fall away, and a slim-looking young fellow fought his way to his side.

"You are just in time, Chick," said the detective.

"We can't fight like this long," said Chick. "Is there no way of escape?"

Then Nick remembered the dusty window looking out on the dark court, and, seizing Lamb by the arm, he dashed away, closely followed by his assistant.

"They are cornered," shouted a voice in French. "After them, and show no mercy. They have killed our friends!"

Then the mob of excited Russians

dashed into the narrow passage in search of their prey.

In a moment they were thundering against the locked and barred doors of the two attic rooms.

"Come out," they shouted. "You can't escape. We are prepared to remain here all night."

Nick went to the window and raised the sash.

The distance to the ground was at least fifty feet.

There was no rope, ladder, fire-escape, or other means of getting down.

The two detectives looked into each other's face with questioning eyes.

"Cornered."

It was Nick who spoke.

"I had rather fight Indians than those howling devils out there," said Chick.

Lamb sat on the floor in a complete state of collapse.

"Get me out," he said, "and the Pressburgs may go to their master, the devil, for their property."

"I'd like to get out myself," said Nick.

Then the Russians threw themselves against the door, and it gave away.

CHAPTER VI.

NELLIE IN TROUBLE.

The wounded woman staggered to her feet when Brown entered the room on Twelfth street.

"You!" she shouted, hoarsely. "You dare to come here!"

Brown made some reply in a language which Nellie did not understand, and the woman sank back on the floor.

"Call a surgeon," said the girl. "She was wounded by a man who came here for the purpose of robbery."

Brown pointed to the man lying on the floor.

"Is he the one?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Who shot him?"

"I did."

Brown regarded the girl with a smile.

"You are too young and too pretty," he said, "to do such deadly work."

The girl looked at the fellow in astonishment.

Brown bent over the still figure on the floor.

"He is dead," he said.

Nellie stepped toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

Brown spoke almost impatiently.

"To summon the police," replied the girl.

"You will do nothing without my consent," said Brown. "I am master here."

"You!"

"Yes."

Nellie pointed to the wounded woman.

"Are you her husband?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you spend your time over a dead robber while your wife lies dying. I am ashamed of you."

Nellie was not talking as a detective. She was speaking as a sympathetic, pitying woman.

Brown flushed and placed his hand on the door.

"Did you understand what she said just now?" he asked.

"No."

"I thought so," said Brown. "She asked me to promise not to call the police—not to make any outcry over what has taken place."

Nellie looked the man in the face and knew that he was lying.

"The man who is trying to secure the fortune," she thought, "stands before me. The woman lying there is his tool."

"Still," continued Brown, "I will call the police if you insist upon it."

"I insist upon nothing," replied the girl, angrily. "If there is nothing I can do for your wife I will retire."

Brown opened the door with a low bow.

"When my wife has sufficiently recovered to be removed to her own room," he said, "I will turn this carcass over to the proper officer."

Nellie stepped to the woman's side and raised her head.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked.

The woman motioned for her to come closer.

The girl did as requested, and the woman's lips moved.

"Don't leave me with him."

Something more was said, but Nellie could not understand what it was.

"What does she say?" asked Brown.

"She asks me not to leave her."

"Ah!"

The face of the man grew black and sullen.

"In that case," he said, "you may remain with her, if you choose; while I summon a surgeon."

"My wound is not serious," said the woman, as soon as Brown disappeared, "but I don't want to be left alone with that man a single instant."

"And you were married to him only this morning?"

"Yes, but I did not understand. Did you hear what that man said to me before he struck me down?"

"I did not."

"He said," continued the woman, "that he had done the work given him to do by my husband."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes; don't leave me alone with him for an instant. He will complete the work they began if you do."

In a short time Brown appeared in the doorway with a surgeon—a hard-looking citizen who glanced about the apartment with snaky eyes.

The fellow completed his work in a few moments and turned to his employer.

"She will be all right in a few days," he said.

There was a knowing look on his face as he spoke.

The woman motioned for the doctor and her husband to retire.

When the door closed behind them the woman tore the bandages from her bleeding head and called to Nellie to bring her water and fresh cloths.

"Oh, I know that man," she said, "and I know the surgeon he employed. His bandages are poisoned."

"Poisoned?"

Used as Nellie was to all phases of crime, she could not comprehend the deviltry the woman had suggested.

"Yes," replied Rebecca, "poisoned, and they would have sworn that I was struck with a poisoned blade."

Another knock came on the door and Nellie opened it.

The man who stood there was Cole, the defaulting clerk. Nellie had not seen him before, but she knew him in an instant from the description Nick Carter had given her when she was put to work on the case.

This description Nick had written at the desk in the outer office, with the clerk sitting in front of him.

It had been mailed while Nick was on his way to Suffolk street.

The great detective never failed to give accurate descriptions of all the principal people in a case to his assistants, whether they were trailing the persons described or not.

In this case the system worked splendidly.

Nellie knew that she had another man to watch. Until Brown announced himself as the husband of the wounded woman she had devoted all her thoughts to the woman herself.

She now recognized him as the chief conspirator.

Cole seemed to be embarrassed at not seeing Brown in the room.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Thomas Brown," he said, after a moment. "Is he here?"

"He is not."

At that moment Brown's voice was heard in the back end of the hall.

"I am here," he said. "What do you want?"

He walked toward the front of the hall as he spoke, and Nellie saw that the doctor was still with him.

He stopped and shook hands with Cole, and the doctor passed on down the stairs.

The two men then stepped into the front room.

"The surgeon says that my wife had better be taken to her own room," Brown said.

Nellie assisted in the removal and then sat down by the side of the bed.

Brown looked at her with angry eyes.

"We will not trouble you further," he said.

"Let her stay," said Rebecca. "I want her here."

"Very well."

Brown went into the front room and closed the door.

Rebecca started up in bed.

"Go to the door and listen," she whispered. "Hear every word they say. Human life depends upon it."

Nellie locked the door and softly opened the transom.

One quick glance told her that there were three men in the room instead of two.

The third man was a villainous-looking fellow with wicked eyes and a pale face half covered by bushy black whiskers.

"I come directly from Suffolk street," he said, in French, "and things are in good shape there."

"You caught that detective?"

"We cornered him in a room. He can't get away. We also cornered one who came to aid him."

Nellie smiled at the idea of getting her chief into any corner from which he could not escape.

"And Lamb is there?"

"Yes."

"And the detective who followed me?"

"Yes. That is the last one I spoke of."

"Where are Joseph and Maurice?"

The fellow laughed.

"They are watching the detectives," he said.

Brown turned to Cole.

"You see, I have bunched my enemies," he said. "When that building burns down to-night there will be no one left for me to fight."

The stranger pointed toward the inner room with one dirty hand.

"She will be dead before morning," whispered Brown.

"I don't think she will," thought Nellie. "I wish Nick and Chick were well out of that building. I wonder how I can reach them?"

The girl had no fears for her chief and Chick. She wanted to save the lives of those in the building by warning them that, unless the plans of the ruffians could be defeated, they would be in deadly peril before morning.

"Who is to fire the building?"

It was the stranger who asked the question.

Brown pointed to Cole.

"He is," he said, briefly.

Cole sprang to his feet.

"You assume too much," he said.

Brown laughed brutally, and passed around a box of cigars.

"Here's to your good luck," he said.

"I must get on a different rig," said Cole.

"Then do it at once and come here."

Cole took his departure, and Brown and

the stranger got their heads nearer together.

"I don't see what you want him in it for," said the latter.

"I don't want him in it," was the cool reply.

"But you have set him to do the most important part of the work. He may squeal after it is over."

"He will not do that, for the reason that he will be cremated in the fire he lights."

"What a fiend you are."

"No; I am a prudent man. I had to use him in order to get some important papers destroyed. Having used him, I naturally want to get rid of him."

"I see."

"Any one of us could have set fire to the building, but that would not rid us of this young man."

"When do you propose to get rid of me in the same way?" asked the stranger, suspiciously.

"Never. You and I alone will remain. We both know how to use our tongues—or, rather, how not to use them."

"Are you certain that Cole will return?"

"Yes; he expects me to give him money enough to get a start in some new land."

Nellie had heard enough.

She stepped down from the transom and approached the bed.

"I must go," she said. "If you heard you know the reason why."

"Have they removed the dead man?"

"Not yet."

"They don't mean to. Brown is not known here, and he will never enter the place again. He is afraid of the police. That is the reason why they plan murder with a dead man before their eyes."

Then the voice of the stranger was heard again.

"Where will you be after the fire?" he asked.

"At the hotel. Report to me there."

Nellie opened the door of the side room.

At that instant, as luck would have it, the stranger opened the door of the front room.

His quick eyes saw the crouching figure of the girl, and his first idea was that she had been listening at the outer door.

He seized her by the arm.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Brown stepped to the door and looked out.

"She is nursing my wife," he said.

"Let her alone."

But the stranger's suspicions were excited, and he drew the girl into the room he had just left.

"Where was she when we were talking?" he asked, turning to Brown, who seemed to regard his actions with disapproval.

Brown pointed toward the inner room.

"She was in there," he said.

The keen eyes of the Russian took in every detail of the door and the transom above.

Nellie had left the transom open.

"Go in there," said the stranger, excitedly, "and see if you can hear what I say when I speak in the same tone of voice we used."

With an oath, and a fiendish glance at the girl, Brown complied, and in an instant returned and said that every word spoken in the front room could be heard in the inner one.

"The girl must not escape," he added.

Realizing that she was in a desperate situation, and that the safety of hundreds of people might depend upon her efforts, Nellie wrenched away from the stranger and darted toward the door.

Brown caught her and threw her back, and the girl drew a revolver.

The chief plotter caught her arm before she could bring the weapon into po-

sition, and it was soon in the possession of the Russian.

"The pretty cat has long claws," he said, with a grin.

Brown locked the door again, and the two men stood regarding the girl with angry glances.

"I'll fix her so that she won't make us trouble for some time to come," said Brown. "We'll tie her good and strong and leave her here until our other work is done; then we can decide upon her fate."

"But your wife? She may aid her to escape."

The chief plotter opened the door of the inner room and looked in. The wounded woman lay upon the bed pale as death, and perfectly motionless.

"She will never move again," he said, turning back. "It is safe to leave the girl here."

"And you?"

"When Cole returns I shall accompany him to Suffolk street."

"You must wait outside. There was a pistol shot here some time ago, and after the excitement of the fire is over the police may come. Here are a dead man, a girl tied hard and fast, and a wounded woman. What could you say to the officers?"

Nellie was taken to the inner room and left bound and gagged by the side of Rebecca, and then the two men went downstairs.

Then the wounded woman opened her eyes.

Nellie motioned to her to remove the gag, but she only groaned.

"I think the wound has paralyzed me," she said, "for I can move neither hand nor foot. We are at last in the power of those murderers."

Outside the two men were waiting impatiently for the return of their tool, but the time passed away and he did not come.

CHAPTER VII.

COLE COMES OUT AHEAD.

Cole went directly from the building on Twelfth street to the office on Broadway.

He kept a rough suit there for use in his night rambles, and it was his purpose to wear it on this occasion.

As he unlocked the office door and stepped inside, he noticed a man leave the opposite side of the street and cross in the middle of the block.

It was early in the evening, however, and the street was full of people, so he thought nothing of the occurrence.

He turned out the lights in the office and changed his clothes.

Then he lit the gas in front of the safe and went out.

When he reached the next corner he saw that the cover of the manhole to the sewer was up, and that two street cleaners stood around the opening with lanterns in their hands.

A sudden chill of fear shot through his veins.

The manhole was the one in which he had deposited the book and papers on the night he had set fire to the office.

"This is a strange time of night to clean manholes," he thought. "I wonder what they are looking for?"

He approached the opening, and stood by the side of one of the men employed there.

"Something lost?"

He asked the question with a tremble in his voice.

The man looked at him coolly and made no reply.

Then he saw that the manhole was clogged, and that a quantity of rubbish had collected in it.

"I was a fool," he thought, "not to burn the book and the papers before I gave the alarm."

One of the men descended into the manhole and poked around in the rubbish with his feet.

"There is nothing here," the clerk heard him say.

He came up in a moment, and the other man went down.

"It must be here somewhere," said the second man. "What does that young fellow want here?"

Cole saw that he was attracting attention, and walked away a short distance.

He was meditating a desperate move.

"If that manhole was clogged as it is now," he thought, "when I threw the books and papers in, they are sure to find them. They may consider them to be of no value, but they may keep them and see the name of the firm on the book. Then the true condition of affairs will be discovered."

He reasoned that it would only be necessary to place an unusual weight upon the rubbish in order to force it into the sewer.

"The man in the manhole," he thought, "rests most of his weight on a rope, in which he has fixed a loop for his foot. If I could manage to cut that rope, the fellow would fall into the sewer and carry the rubbish with him."

He placed his pocket knife where it could be reached instantly, and went back to the opening.

As he reached the place the man on the street turned away for an instant to warn a passing team.

Cole reached out his hand and drew the knife across the rope which was fastened to a bar of wood lying across the opening.

Some of the strands gave way, but the rope was thick and strong, and could not be completely severed by one stroke of the knife.

When the strands parted the rope sagged, and the man below called out that something was wrong.

His companion turned around hastily.

"What is it?" he asked.

Cole crept away.

"The rope is breaking. I shall be in the sewer in a moment. Pull me up."

The man reached down to take his companion by the hand.

For an instant he bent over the opening.

Cole rushed up and gave him a violent push.

He lunged forward and fell into the hole, but caught on the edge of the pavement so that his weight was not upon the man below him.

Cole saw him fall and hastened to the walk.

"That was a bright idea," he muttered.

But the man who had been pushed clambered to the surface again, and soon had his companion with him.

The latter's feet were drawn closely together, and the trembling defaulter saw a package between them.

"It is the book," he muttered.

The men closed the manhole and went away, Cole following at a distance, until they entered a saloon, where a man seemed to be waiting for them.

Cole saw the man take the book and papers into his hand and make a brief examination of them, and then give the men some money.

The fellows went away, and in a short time the man having possession of the book also left the place.

Before long the man turned into a side street and then Cole crept up behind him.

He raised his arm to strike.

The man wheeled around and raised his arm.

"It took you a long time to get up to me," he said, with a smile. "You are not a cautious man with your feet when engaged in this sort of business."

With an oath, the defaulter sprang upon the man.

He was met by a blow that sent him whirling to the walk.

The man stood regarding him curiously until he got on his feet again.

"Whenever you are able to behave yourself," he said, "you may walk along with me."

"With you! Where?"

"To the police station."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I shall take you by force."

"On what charge?"

"Embezzlement and arson."

"Who are you?"

"It is enough that I am an officer."

Cole stepped nearer and peered anxiously into the officers face.

"I don't know you," he said, "and I don't believe what you say. Release me, and I will go about my business."

"You will come to the police station."

Cole looked searchingly at the fellow again, ending with a stare at the package under his arm.

"What have you there?" he asked.

"The books and papers you threw into the sewer."

"I threw nothing into the sewer."

"Then why did you cut the rope when the men were searching there to-night?"

The officer took out a pair of handcuffs.

The young defaulter made a grab at the book in the officer's hand and started away on a run.

The street was crowded, and the officer did not like to shoot, for some innocent person might be struck by the bullet.

He darted after the defaulter, and almost had his hand on him, when he whirled suddenly and darted into a saloon.

A tough gang was standing in front of the bar, and Cole called out to them as he passed:

"Stop him."

A burly ruffian threw himself in the officer's way.

"Get that book away from him!"

shouted the defaulter. "It is my property."

The officer pushed past the crowd of toughs and made for the defaulter again, but he dodged away and disappeared in a dark hall in the rear of the saloon.

As he turned to leave the place the tough who had first accosted him stepped up again.

"Wot youse come chasin' in here for?" he demanded.

The officer grasped the bundle more firmly, and started for the door. He saw that it was no use to try to capture the young man there.

"Wot youse doin' wid dat young kid's book?" demanded the bully.

The officer tried to reach the door, and tried to draw his revolver, but half a dozen bullies sprang upon him.

He was thrown to the floor and the book and papers taken from him.

Then Cole made his appearance.

He was overjoyed at the return of the evidence of his crime, and the papers so important to Brown and his gang.

"I can make my own terms with him now," Cole thought, "and we shall see who will do the dirty work to-night."

The young man's whole nature was in revolt at the brutal manner in which the plotter had treated him as soon as he had served his ends.

"Who sent you after the papers?" he asked, turning to the officer.

"Your employers. They have been watching you ever since the fire."

"Then you'll have to stay in the custody of the boys until I get out of the country," said Cole. "I don't like this watching business."

Then he turned to two burly toughs who stood looking on in wonder.

"Come on, boys," he said, "I want your help to-night, and I want you to see me down a chump who thinks he has me dead to rights."

Accompanied by the toughs, he started away to meet Brown.

CHAPTER VIII.

GETTING OUT OF A TRAP.

When the door of the Suffolk street attic fell with a crash under the assaults of the Russians, the attacking party found a steady row of revolvers blocking the way to the interior of the room.

"Stand back," said Nick, coolly. "The first man who attempts to enter will be shot down."

The sweaters fell back to the end of the hall and consulted for a short time, then several of them returned to the lower floor.

Only three were left on guard.

Two of these were Joseph and Maurice Pressburg.

Chick stepped to the window and looked down into the court.

"There is no hope of escape there," he said.

"It would take a pair of wings to get out in that way," said Nick.

They could hear the men outside whispering, and occasionally a soft footstep was heard approaching the broken door.

In a short time the brothers began to talk louder, and in French.

Nick stood close to the door and listened.

"No one knows they are here," said Joseph, "and so it will be safe to carry out the boss' idea."

"But the others?"

"He will wait until the people have gone away from the shop, and the others can be aroused when the fire starts."

The detective turned to Chick and said:

"It seems you got here just in time to be roasted."

"I don't understand."

"They mean to set fire to the building as soon as it is dark."

Lamb staggered back and sank down on one of the boxes.

"Help me out," he said, piteously, "help me away from this horrible place."

"Keep up your nerve," said Nick, "we have been in worse holes than this, and came out of them with flying colors."

"But to be burned here, like rats in a trap. It is terrible."

"We are not burned yet," was the reply.

"I wonder where Nellie is?" said Chick, in a moment.

"Lamb here," replied Nick, "gave me the address of the woman who seems to be making all this trouble, and she went to call on her."

"To call on her?"

Nick laughed.

"Yes," he said. "Nellie went up to Twelfth street to form the acquaintance of the woman in the case. I have not the least doubt that she will succeed."

"Then she may catch on there," said Chick, "and help us out in some way."

"I think we'll have to help ourselves out," said Nick.

The detective went into the front room and remained some moments.

Then he came back and whispered to Chick to make all the noise he could, and returned.

Chick shouted out to the men who stood in the hall and moved the boxes about the floor until the men in the shop below heard the noise and the foreman came rushing up stairs.

"What are you doing in there?" he demanded.

Chick talked back to the fellow in English, and invited him to have a game of cards.

The foreman talked with his subordinates for a few moments, and then went back to his shop.

"I'm going away soon," Chick heard him say, as he went away, "and you must take good care of these men."

After his departure, Chick went to the front room and looked in.

Nick was cutting away the partition between the front and the door opening into the little hall.

"What are you doing?" Chick asked.

"Getting out."

Chick thought a moment.

"That will lead into another room," he said, "but that other room must lead into the main hall or the little passage. What will you gain by getting into such a room?"

"Gain the rear of the enemy," replied Nick. "They will hear something drop directly."

"Well, work away, and I'll keep up my minstrel show."

Chick went back to the rear room to find Lamb gazing excitedly toward the corner of the room to the left of the door.

"What is that noise?" he asked.

Chick listened, and heard the dull grinding of a bit.

"They are cutting through there," he whispered. "They want a good shot at us without taking any risk."

Lamb almost fainted away.

"Let them cut," said Chick. "When they get most through we will go into the front room."

Nick laughed when informed of what was going on.

"I'm glad of it," he said. "It will keep them in that little hall, and we can come up behind and so get them where they now have us."

In a short time the hole in the partition was large enough for the detective to crawl through.

He found himself in a well-furnished room having two doors.

One opened into the main hall and one into the little passage.

The door opening into the main hall was not far from a window which looked out on the street, some distance from the head of the stairs.

As Nick stood there listening he heard some one ascend the stairs.

Then he heard the voice of the foreman.

"Ivan," he called.

"That must be the third ruffian," thought Nick. "The others are Joseph and Maurice Pressburg."

One of the three men approached the window, and stood talking with his master.

"There is no use of three men staying here," said the latter. "You come down stairs. We are short of workmen in the shop."

"But the Pressburgs? They will do something rash if I leave them alone."

"What are they doing in that hall?"

"Cutting through the partition, so as to get a shot at the men in that room."

"Tell them that I have other plans, and then come downstairs. To tell the truth, you are the only one I dare trust there in my absence. The workmen think something criminal is going on."

"And then?"

"You are to come back when I return."

The foreman did not want the detectives and the lawyer killed in the manner proposed by the brothers. There would be too much risk in removing the bodies.

Besides, he wanted the brothers and Ivan to meet their fate in the burning building.

Then all evidences of the crime would be destroyed.

There would be no one left to tell the story of the fire and the plots that had brought it about.

He did not know until after his talk with Brown in the building on Twelfth street that the man who was to set the fire was also to meet his death there.

The plotter really wanted the man he was calling away to stand guard in the workshop, and intended to send him back to his death upon his return.

The two men left the loft together, after explaining the matter to the two brothers.

"We have only two to fight now," said Nick, "and I guess we can manage them."

When the Pressburgs ceased working at the partition, in obedience to the command of their master, they stationed themselves in the main hall in a position which enabled them to look down the whole length of the passage.

"We'll have to do some quick work when we get out there," said Chick, "or they will shoot and attract the attention of the people who are watching downstairs."

"We must wait until that foreman goes away," said Nick.

The two detectives went back to the front room.

"There is something about this that puzzles me," said Nick. "They are trying to get rid of these Pressburg brothers, and yet they keep on the best of terms with them."

"We'll find out before long," said Chick. "It is getting late."

Nick stood by the window a moment and then turned to his assistant with a smile on his face.

"I have it," he said.

"Well?"

"They mean to keep them here until the building is set on fire and allow them to perish in the flames."

"You've hit it," said Chick. "And that puts a new responsibility on us."

"What's that?"

"We must help them out."

"After their brutal attempt on our lives?" replied Chick.

"They are innocent in all they do," was the reply. "They think we are here to take them back to the headsman in Russia, and they can hardly be blamed for what they are doing."

"I suppose you are right," said Chick,

"but I would like to see them scorched a little."

"We may all get scorched," was the reply.

The detectives waited a long time before acting.

They had no doubt that they would be able to overcome the two brothers, but they knew that every moment they remained there after such a step had been taken would be an extra risk.

"We must wait until dark," said Nick, "and we may as well leave the guards alone until that time. Then if anyone comes up here all will be in proper shape."

"Good idea," said Chick.

When it was twilight outside, it was very dark in the hall, and the waiting men heard the brothers talking about getting a light.

Then the detectives crept out of the door, after unlocking it with a pick-lock, and advanced upon the men whose lives they were trying to save.

At that instant Joseph and Maurice stood looking into the little passage, with their backs toward the door by which the detectives left their hiding place.

In a moment there were two quick blows, followed by heavy falls.

The men struggled on the floor a moment, and made a good deal of noise.

The door below was opened, and a voice called out, demanding to know what was wrong up stairs.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S BRAVEST DEED.

The door of the sweaters' shop opened, and Brown and Cole walked in and stood for a moment talking to the foreman.

Then they all stepped out into the hall, for the business they had to discuss was not understood by the workers.

"Are the prisoners all right?" asked Brown.

"Yes," was the sullen reply. "You have been long enough getting here. They might have escaped, for all of you."

"I had to wait for Cole," was the reply. "He went back to the office, as you know, to change his clothes, and found an officer and two street cleaners searching the manhole where he threw the papers."

"Did they find them?"

"Yes; but Cole followed on and got them away from the copper."

"He did well."

"And now," said Brown, "he refuses to give them up or to set the fire. He has hidden the papers in some safe place and proposes to keep them to insure his safety. He brought some toughs with him, but sent them away."

The foreman turned to Cole with an oath.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "If I had my way you would be killed right here."

"Kill me," said Cole, coolly, "and the papers will be in the hands of the officers in the morning, together with a full confession from me in regard to this whole business."

"You are cunning."

"I can take care of myself," was the reply. "Give me ten thousand dollars and all the papers will be delivered into your hands."

"We've got to do it," said Brown. "Where is Ivan? I presume the Pressburgs are still on guard?"

"Yes, they are on guard, and Ivan heard a noise up there a moment ago and went up."

"Well, the oil is there in the closet," said Brown. "Send the help away, and I will sneak up there and saturate the stairs and hall with the stuff. Cole can help."

"How did you leave things at the other place?" asked the foreman.

"All right. The dead man won't talk, Rebecca is dead by this time from the effects of the poison, and we can finish the girl when this job is done. Besides, we have the papers under our control, and everything will end with this fire. Things could not be in better shape."

The fellow would not have been so sure of success could he have seen the crouching figure on the stairs.

The foreman sent the workers away and brought out the oil.

Brown and Cole went on upstairs with it.

"If the foreman has done his work well," said Brown, "a barrel of the stuff has already been poured about the basement. There is no hope for anyone in the building after the fire is set."

The two men stopped on the landing and poured out the oil until the stairs were saturated with it.

Then Brown asked his companion to step along the hall softly and put some there.

Cole started to do so, but the instant his back was turned he was seized from behind and thrown to the floor.

"Where are the papers?" hissed Brown in his ear. "Tell me how to get them or you shall never leave this place alive."

"Will you release me if I tell you?" gasped the defaulter.

"Yes. Speak quick. We may attract the attention of the men who are watching at the end of the hall."

"They are in the safe at the Monmouth Hotel. No one can get them but me. If I do not return in the morning they will be given to the police."

"I can get them, you traitor."

Brown struck the prostrate man as he spoke and the defaulter sank back unconscious, with a bad wound in his head.

"It is strange that I see nothing of the guards," muttered Brown, as he crept

down stairs. "They must be watching in the front room."

The sound of crackling flames were now audible on the first floor, and smoke in heavy volumes began to ascend the stairways from the cellar.

In a few moments more the smoke burst through the closed blinds on the street floor.

The firebugs had evidently begun their deadly work.

Two of the scoundrels carefully opened the hall door, gazed furtively around, and then bounded into the street.

They had hardly touched the sidewalk when a man arrayed as a countryman leaped after them, and with each hand grabbed one of the murderous villains.

The countryman was Nick Carter, and he held the wretches in his iron grasp.

Nick gave utterance to a peculiar whistle, a prearranged signal, and Chick came to his aid.

Nick handcuffed the scoundrels hand to hand, and turned them over to the custody of his assistant.

Meanwhile, before the outbreak of the flames, exciting events had been going on in the burning tenement.

When Brown had reached the landing below, he saw a girl toiling up the long stairway.

She was pale and miserably dressed, and she looked at the man above her with appealing eyes.

"I want work," she said, when she stood by his side.

"Come in the morning," said Brown. "The foreman is not here."

The girl did not start away at once, and something in her manner excited the suspicion of the fellow.

He took her roughly by the arm.

"Come in here," he said. "I want to look at you."

Once inside the room, he tore away the hood and scarf worn by the girl and struck at her.

"I know you," he shouted. "You are the girl I left bound at the house on Twelfth street."

Nellie drew her revolver and fired, but the bullet went wide of its mark.

Then the door was thrown open, and Nick Carter bounded in.

There was a short scuffle, and Brown lay handcuffed on the floor.

"Quick! to the basement!" shouted Nick, "the entire building will soon be in flames."

Leaving Brown in charge of the brave girl, Nick once more hastened downstairs, and was soon in the basement.

The doors had been forced, and the light wooden partitions had been saturated with kerosene oil.

The cellar was divided off into bins, where the wood and coal of the tenants were kept, and every partition had been soaked with oil.

As the detective sprang inside, a figure, evidently one of the firebugs, glided away from one of the bins, and they saw a faint light flare up into a big one.

The fiends had done their work, and the third man had remained behind to be sure of its success.

In an instant he was under arrest.

The only thing to do now was to save the people in the building.

And the Pressburgs and Cole were helpless on the top floor, with the stairs saturated with oil!

Chick here rejoined Nick, having turned his prisoners over to two policemen.

When the detectives reached the second landing, giving the alarm as they went, they saw that the flames had crept up through a back stairway, and that the whole interior would be on fire in a moment.

"We waited too long," said Nick. "But those people must be saved. It is our fault if they are burned alive now."

They reached the fifth landing and darted into the sweaters' shop.

"Get up," shouted Nick, pushing Brown with his foot, "and you, Nellie, take him to the street and deliver him to an officer. Shoot him if he makes a false move."

But Brown was thoroughly frightened, and walked away without a word of protest.

Then Nick turned to the stairs, but Chick caught his arm.

"The flames have reached the floor," he said, "and the stairs are saturated with oil. It is certain death to go there."

"Cover them with your revolver when they come down," shouted Nick, breaking away and dashing up the slippery stairs.

He reached the upper floor without difficulty, and called out to the men who lay on the floor that the building was on fire.

Their struggles directed the detective to their side.

Their bonds were soon cut, and they started downstairs.

Then Nick lifted Cole in his arms. Lamb had already left the building.

As Nick lifted the unconscious man a sheet of flame sprang up on the stairs, cutting off his escape.

"Drop him and jump," shouted Chick, retreating slowly before the terrible heat. "You may save yourself yet."

It were madness to attempt to pass through that sheet of flame.

Still carrying the unconscious man in his strong arms, Nick made for the attic room which looked out on the street.

The oil on the floor of the hall caught fire as he passed along and set fire to his clothes.

He extinguished the flames and struggled through the blinding smoke to the window.

He dashed out the sash at one blow and leaned far out to fill his lungs with air.

The people below saw him and raised a mighty cry.

The firemen put up a ladder, but it was not long enough to reach the window and a cry of terror went up from the crowd.

"Leave the man you are carrying and drop to the ladder," shouted a fireman, "the building will soon collapse."

But Nick refused to leave Cole there to the death to which the defaulter would have consigned him, although the flames were now in the room.

He took the fellow in his arms and dropped, releasing one arm when he came to the top rung of the ladder.

Another cry of terror went up from below. They all expected to see the daring man dashed to pieces in the street.

But Nick caught the ladder and held on.

"Not one man in a million could have done that," shouted a man in the crowd, and then a great shout went up.

When Nick reached the ground it was some time before he could escape from the crowd which swarmed around to congratulate him.

At last, however, he reached a comparatively quiet place, and laid Cole down before an officer.

"Arrest him for embezzlement," he said.

Then Chick and Nellie made their appearance.

"You'll have to have a guardian," said the former. "You nearly lost your life trying to save the man who would have murdered you."

"Where are the others?" asked Nick.

"The Pressburgs and Brown are under arrest," was the reply, "and the foreman was burned to death in the basement."

"And the tenants? Did all escape?"

"Yes," said an officer, "thanks to your prompt alarm."

"There is more to be done," said Nellie.

And then she told about the woman and the dead man on Twelfth street.

"How did you get out?" asked Nick.

"The woman recovered sufficiently to aid me," was the reply. "She was merely a tool, and lays no claim to the fortune."

"Then it was all Brown's work?"

"Yes."

The woman was found without trouble. The dead man was removed and the woman soon recovered. No complaint was made against her, and she soon returned to Russia.

Nick secured the papers and the confession in the morning.

"This is the first time on record," he said, "when a detective working on a case on his own hook ever helped me," and then he added: "I suppose the toughs have released him before now."

For the whole story of the capture of the papers was told in the written confession made by Cole and left with the papers in the hotel safe.

The officer who had done such good service without knowing it was found and rewarded, and the toughs were properly punished.

The confession convicted Brown of aiding in setting fire to an inhabited dwelling in the night time, and he was executed.

Cole received a long sentence, and the Pressburg brothers got their fortune. The remaining firebugs got long terms, being old offenders.

The brothers were very grateful to Nick when fully acquainted with all the facts, and insisted on rewarding him handsomely. They never returned to Russia, although they might have done so.

Lawyer Lamb never mixed up in detective work again.

And Nick is not anxious to take another case against the firebugs.

[THE END.]

The next number of the Nick Carter Weekly will contain "A Demand for Justice; or, Nick Carter Offered a Bribe," by the author of Nick Carter.

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